Thank you all for being here, starting with the Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation, which gave the International Bajaj Award for promoting Gandhian values outside India to Mr Pierre Parodi and later to me, the Institute of Gandhian Studies at Wardha, which has been our most faithful partner for more than fifteen years, and especially its Chairman Shri Darmadhikari, Shri Siby Joseph, Shri Bharat Mahodaya et al.

Our intent, in proposing this gathering in October 2017, is to commemorate Lanza del Vasto’s visit to Gandhi here in Wardha in February, March and April 1937, during which Vasto, whom Gandhi named Shantidas or Servant of Peace, gained the conviction that the non-violence Gandhi advocated was the surest way to bring the world out of its recurrent violent impasses. At that time in European history, Mussolini’s fascism and Hitler’s Nazism were in full swing, resulting entire nations in losing their direction. As a man of his time, aware of the obvious risk of the impending world war, Lanza del Vasto set sail from Marseilles to Colombo to meet the man he sensed to be “an oasis of greenery and peace” in a fevered world. We will be celebrating these moments with various tributes; you may have seen the film I directed on Vasto’s life, and how the whole of Gandhian philosophy was transplanted into Europe starting in 1948 with the founding of the communities of the Ark. I will leave it to the current manager of the Ark to talk about the state of the community after nearly 70 years of existence.

But commemorating Del Vasto’s visit to Gandhi is also an opportunity, today, to work together on extremely important issues that risk and threaten our societies. if we ignore them there will be inevitable consequences. This is why I felt it necessary, among non-violent Gandhian movements, to tackle the problem of nuclear proliferation, both in military and civilian contexts. It must be emphasized that nuclear weapons are not a source of security. Basing the security of peoples on a threat to other peoples is a profound error, if not a moral failing.

Insights and reflections along these lines seem to elude politicians, because their intent is not to be moral; rather, they hide behind the need for re-election or for otherwise holding on to their power. The military leaders of NATO, in particular, hide behind the immense responsibility with which they believe they are endowed, so that, as the ideologues of national defenses, they
can portray nuclear weapons as a sacred, life-saving necessity that guarantees peace.

Pope Benedict XIV responded to these certitudes by describing them as both baneful and fallacious. According to Jean-Marie Muller, “these two words used by the Bishop of Rome in reference to nuclear deterrence are particularly significant: ‘baneful’ evokes death and misery, while ‘fallacious’ calls to mind deceit and illusion. These adjectives, never before used by a pope, radically delegitimized nuclear deterrence in the here and now - not only for all the States that possess them, taken together, but also for each nuclear-armed State, taken individually. Indeed, properly organized nuclear disarmament begins with the self.”

It is this pressing need to promote each nation’s unilateral ability to decide to stop manufacturing these instruments of death directed against innocent populations that has prompted the Vatican’s permanent observer at the UN, Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, to say in no uncertain terms: “The threat as well as the use of nuclear weapons is barred by law. It is unlawful to threaten an attack if the attack itself would be unlawful. The unlawfulness of the threat and use of nuclear weapons calls into serious question the lawfulness of the possession of nuclear weapons...In conformity with the good faith principle, it cannot be lawful to continue indefinitely to possess weapons which are unlawful to use or threaten to use.”

In one of his last books, Achever Clausewitz, René Girard—a member of the French Academy, anthropologist and advocate of non-violence, and professor at Stanford—says that we collectively entered the apocalyptic era in the 1870s. In his view, before it can collapse, violence must first go to its extreme, at which point all of humanity, filled with disgust, will at last be willing to turn to other solutions. Nuclear weapons seem to be this extreme. But must things really come to this? We will have the opportunity to discuss the issue with experts.

Next, we will address the place of small farmers in a globalized society. As we well know, Western politicians’ answer to this question is clear: In the future, it is the experts of the agricultural and chemical industry who will meet the food needs of peoples. Theirs is a highly industrialized agriculture of land grabbing, consolidation, and inevitably causing the gradual but certain disappearance of the diversity to which we owe our environmental balance. To overcome the inconvenience of this diversity, the proponents of agro-business revert to thinking in terms of pesticides: insects, fungi and “weeds” are to be “killed off,” vast amounts of chemicals are to be dumped into depleted lands, and so on.

Two former FAO rapporteurs, Jean Ziegler and Olivier de Schutter, have officially declared in their reports that the problem of world hunger is directly connected to the agro-industry, which they describe as futureless; in their view, agricultural production should be left in the hands of small local farmers, scattered around cities, using organic farming. I would add that ideally, in keeping with Gandhi’s wishes, everyone should be aware of this problem and capable of producing their own basic food, namely fruit and vegetables, and at
the neighborhood level, cereal and small-scale livestock. An example can be seen in the Sri Lankan villages pursuing the initiatives proposed by the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement of Mr. Ariyaratne. In this case, we are far from a globalized world.

Many current governments (including that of India) prefer to give food to the people rather than letting them grow the food in their lands with a modest degree of autonomy, which would allow them to regain confidence in Life.

Regarding the problem of land ownership, that is, the availability of agricultural land for small farmers, I have observed in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Senegal, Burkina Faso, India and elsewhere the presence of two different perceptions of the law. These opposed perceptions will continue to be a source of conflict, with no solution in sight, as long as they go unacknowledged by states.

First, there is the customary, ancestral law found among indigenous peoples. From this perspective, most of the time, man is not the owner of the land, but its guarantor or steward, and he willingly describes himself as a belonging to the land from which he draws food and shelter. For thousands of years these peoples inhabited Mother Earth without causing her harm. Great anthropologists-ethnologists such as Claude Levi-Strauss have attested to this fact in their writings. They objected to the pretensions of our so-called modern world which, through the constitutional right of private land ownership, institutes a commodification of Mother Earth and delivers up an ancestral common good to speculators. This clash between two visions of the law is a source of many conflicts. Above all it is also the source of a haughty and contemptuous outlook of policy makers who emphasise state rights over those of the people whose survival is directly linked to the land. Policymakers must take these realities into account and favour small family farming units: it is a question of morality and common sense, and they must strive to restore a balance in land rights, at least in a first stage.

Without being too naïve—for we are aware of today's widespread lack of knowledge about agricultural practices - even in the most remote areas, more and more training courses are being offered in agro-ecology and permaculture. States have a duty to get involved with such training. Not only will a return to traditional family farming provide employment and agricultural training, but it will also help to stabilize populations and avoid mass migrations. As we all know, in 2016, tens of thousands of Sub-Saharan died in the Mediterranean, attracted by the false Western Eldorado and above all driven from home by the threefold scourge of civil war, the grabbing of their land that was their timeless legacy, and climate change. We cannot accept for the Mediterranean to become a graveyard for those left behind by a globalized world. Strikingly, in a small country like Senegal, over just 10 years, 800,000 hectares of land have been sold off to agro-industry companies to produce agrofuel.

I would add that my experience of tending my own family garden every day is a source of wonder and delight—both a meditation and a highly beneficial
form of physical exercise—and I recommend it to everyone as a fountain of happiness and joy.

During our meetings, we will thus strive to find solutions, or at least avenues for a transition, while drawing inspiration from Gandhi. In this regard I would like to quote Lanza del Vasto, regarding the Plowman:

“Look at the bent labourer and think of the clusters of human beings that hang from his members; think of the pyramid built upon his spine, for he labours for the tax collector, the constable, the scribbler, the banker, the speech-maker and for those who sell their bodies, who eat little biscuits and chatter in drawing rooms, for the swindler and the minister, the dancer and the President: he carries their Chateaux, their private hotels, their casinos and their lackeys, their spies and their officers, their cars, their trains and their canons, on his back...”

The Four Scourges, Lanza del Vasto, The Devil Takes a Hand in the Game, Chapter 25[translation: Jean Sidgwick]

Finally, gathered around Gandhi, here at Sewagram, Wardha, we will also look for a solution in order to be able to work together and create a common platform for action. This is an idea I had already proposed in 2008 at the conference here at the Institute, although the project unfortunately remained on the backburner. We have tried to maintain ties with Ekta Parishad, with whom two symposia were held, one in Bhopal, the other in Saint-Antoine, a community of the Ark in France. A two-month tour of Latin America with SERPAJ (Peace and Justice Service) also bore fruit, even if the distance overshadowed our goodwill and local problems quickly overwhelmed the partners from the different countries. In Mexico, for example, many people who were willing to collaborate were assassinated...

Faced with so many challenges, I propose that all the movements gathered here in Gandhi’s name agree to come together under a single movement and obtain permanent consultative status with the United Nations in order to promote Gandhian values. In closing, I would like to cite Lanza del Vasto’s book Pilgrimage to the Source in which he relates his February 1937 visit to Gandhi:

“To turn back is not Gandhi’s intention. No one is less given than he to historical revivals or to harking back to the good old days. He professes neither hatred of the West nor a horror of neither civilization nor contempt for economy. On the contrary, his revolution looks forward with sound and sober hope. He is the first wise man in the East to prescribe work as a duty for every man and a road to salvation. He has laid the foundations of a new civil constitution, of new economic development and of a new culture.

But for him, the sole interest of economy is what the great economists have never taken into consideration (and Karl Marx in this respect is just as oblivious as the others): the sole interest of economy is not to develop
economy but to develop the human being, give him peace, raise him and set him free."

Thank you for your attention, and I wish you positive and productive meetings.

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